◙ Toward a Critical Media/ Cultural Studies

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Radio, television, film, and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which individuals in contemporary media and consumer societies forge their very identi- ties, including sense of self, notion of what it means to be male or female, and how people experience class, ethnicity and race, sexuality, age, nationality, and other markers of identity. Media culture helps shape people's view of the world and deepest values, defin- ing good or evil, their positive ideals and sense of who they are as a people, as well as who and what are threats and enemies, often creating sharp divisions between "us" and "them." Media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources that constitute a com- mon culture and through the appropriation of which individuals become integrated into their culture and society. Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not. They dramatize and legitimate the powers that be and show the powerless that they must stay in their places or face powerful forces of repression.

We are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society, and thus it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its institutions, practices, discourses, images, and spectacles. The media industries are a powerful institution in contemporary societies, and it is essential to comprehend how they work in order to understand, act in, and transform the environment in which we live our lives. The media are an essential economic force, helping manage consumer demand, constructing needs and fantasies through advertising and entertainment which is often an advertisement for the consumer society constructed and reproduced in part by the media. Key instruments of political power, the media provide a terrain upon which political battles are fought and serve as sites of political manipulation and domination. A central force in social life, the

media dominate many people's leisure activities and are powerful sources of socialization and ideological domination, as well as a field of struggle, resistance, and the construction of social alternatives.

Media culture is also a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy, which contributes to teaching individuals how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire—and what not to. The media are forms of pedagogy that teach people how to be men and women. They show how to dress, look, and consume; how to perceive and react to members of different social groups; and how to be popular and successful, as well as how to avoid failure. Media culture dramatizes in advertising, comedies, dramas, and other forms the price of failure to fit in and succeed and celebrates the pleasures and rewards of success.

In sum, media culture teaches individuals how to fit into the dominant system of norms, values, practices, and institutions, and demonstrates punishments for failure to conform. Consequently, the gaining of critical media literacy is an important resource for individuals and citizens in learning how to cope with and act within a seductive cultural environment. Grasping the central functions of the media within society, its roles of power and domination, and the ways that it serves the interests of corporate and state power in reproducing the existing society helps one to become more critical of media culture, able to resist its power and influence, and able to construct one's own meanings and cultural forms. Learning how to read, criticize, and resist sociocultural manipulation can thus help empower one in relation to dominant forms of media and culture. It can enhance individual sovereignty vis-à-vis media culture and give people more power over their cultural environment, as well as the ability to transform their society and create alternative forms of culture and identities.

A critical media/cultural studies also helps teach media consumers and citizens to better read, decode, and critique media culture in order to become literate readers, critics, and ultimately producers of their own culture, society, and individual identity. These critical approaches can thus generate better understanding of contemporary societies and help produce active individual subjects. A critical media literacy can empower individuals to critically engage the images, stories, spectacles, and media that constitute culture and identities, deeply influence politics, and play a crucial role in the economy, as well as to create new identities, cultures, and forms of life.

In this chapter, I discuss the potential contributions of media/cultural studies to understanding the important multiple functions of the media in society and the ways that media culture are caught up with and reproduce power and domination, as well as providing forms of resistance and social alternatives. Drawing on the multiple forms of critical theories, communications, media, and cultural studies that have emerged in the past decades (some of which are described by Rhonda Hammer and myself in the general Introduction to this book), I will set forth here some perspectives on doing media/cultural studies in the contemporary moment.

In presenting my own approach, I want to stress, however, that the field of media/cultural studies is open and evolving and always a subject of contestation and transformation. There are an overwhelming variety of media and cultural studies in a wealth of fields and academic disciplines, national and local cultures, and emergent fields like

cyberstudies, which are constantly changing, producing new works, theories, methods, and articulations (see Introduction). As Larry Grossberg usefully reminds us (1997, p. 397):

> There is not, and never has been, a singular thing called British cultural studies. There never even was a thing called the position of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, which is often mythically and sometimes nostalgically seen as the location of the origin of British cultural studies. Even at the Centre, there were always different and sometimes competing, powerfully invested positions and projects. The differences were both theoretical and political, and they often led to highly charged, emotionally difficult debates. Consequently, even the best histories of the Centre, or of British cultural studies, that have been written manage at best to describe what John Clarke has called "the diversity that won." There are always voices that were part of the discussion that have been excluded (or that excluded themselves) or erased.

Hence, in the following sections, I want to lay out a comprehensive and open, albeit delineated, field of media/cultural studies emerging out of specific theoretical and historical traditions that make possible broad theorizing, contextualizing, and critique of media culture within its field of production, its evolving cultural forms, reception, and uses and effects.[1] The following analysis of components of a critical media/cultural studies provides a broad framework within which work can be done, and an overview of what features of media cultural production, texts, artifacts, practices, and audiences can be engaged in doing media/cultural studies. It also provides my own mapping of the field of contemporary cultural studies, much as Grossberg does in this work, and as other participants in the field such as John Hartley (2003), Chris Rojek (2007), and Chris Barker (2008) have done in recent books. Thus, this chapter is intended as an analysis of some components of the emerging field of media/cultural studies and not a prescriptive model that one must follow, as different projects will require the mixture and articulation of different components, theories, methods, and approaches.

■ Components of a Critical Media/ Cultural Studies

As emphasized in the Introduction to our reader, the concept of a media/cultural studies attempts to overcome one-sided positions in media, communications and cultural studies that focus alone on topics such as text analysis, audiences, political economy, the supposed effects of communication, or other single issues in isolation from constituent economic, political, social and cultural dimensions of the field of culture and society. To be sure, for some projects, one might want to focus on one specific topic in media/cultural studies, such as representations of race or gender in key films, or a question of political economy, such as media ownership and how increased corporate control is producing a homogenization of news and entertainment, especially if one is beginning to study the field. Moreover, students would most likely begin doing media/cultural studies by taking on a specific theme, such as the representations of women, race, and class in a film like

Crash (2005) or *Babel* (2006) (see Kellner, forthcoming), or representations of masculinity in the *Rocky* and *Rambo* films. Other projects might combine analysis of texts and audience reception of popular singers like Madonna, Britney Spears, Hilary Duff, or Kanye West.[2]

Yet as one advances in doing media/cultural studies, the questions of mediations and connections emerge as one sees how production in different sectors of media industries intersects with the construction of specific kinds of texts and audience uses of media. Thus a critical media/cultural studies aims at making connections between texts and contexts, media industries and technologies, politics and economics, and specific texts, practices, and audiences. As one proceeds through the field of media/cultural studies, one can attain a broad framework for contextualizing and analyzing a wide range of cultural artifacts and gain better understanding of the role of the media in contemporary economy, politics, culture, and everyday life. For instance, analyzing the Virginia Tech shootings in April 2007 would require analysis of the role of the media in the spectacle, male rage and the crisis of masculinity that leads young men to become school shooters and construct identity and fame through guns and violence, and an out-of-control gun culture and culture of celebrity in the United States (see Kellner, 2008).

As I have argued (Kellner, 1995), the Frankfurt School and British cultural studies articulate a threefold project of analyzing the production and political economy of culture, cultural texts, and the audience reception and use of those texts and their effects.[3] This tripartite model delineates a specific construction of the field of media/cultural studies, it is not a procrustean bed that every analysis must follow. It provides a framework and overview of a model of media/cultural studies, not necessary components of a complete or ideal work in the field. This approach insists that media/cultural studies should contextualize its object and analysis in the field of socioeconomic and political power (political economy); that cultural representation of a specific object has many dimensions including class, gender, race, sexuality, and other multiple determinants; that the phenomenon under question has multiple and perhaps contradictory effects and will be appropriated and will influence people in various ways according to their own subject position and context of appropriation; and that a cultural studies analysis cannot exhaust its object of study, whose appropriations and meanings may change over time.[4] This model suggests that there are many dimensions to media/cultural studies work ranging from the economic to the political, social, and cultural dimensions; that cultural artifacts have depths and layers of meaning and uses; and that a media/cultural studies must draw on multiple disciplines to adequately engage its objects.

Production and Political Economy

Since the topic has been neglected in many modes of recent media and cultural studies, it is important to stress the significance of analyzing cultural texts within their system of production and distribution, often referred to as "political economy."[5] A political economy approach to media and culture centers more on the production and distribution of culture than on interpreting texts or studying audiences. The references to the terms

political and *economy* call attention to the fact that the production and distribution of culture take place within a specific economic and political system, constituted by relations between the state, the economy, social institutions and practices, culture, and organizations like the media. Political economy thus encompasses economics and politics and the relations between them and the other central structures of society and culture. In regard to media institutions, for instance, in Western democracies, a capitalist economy dictates that cultural production is governed by laws of the market, but the democratic imperatives mean that there is some regulation of culture by the state. There are often tensions within a given society concerning which activities should be governed by the imperatives of the market, or economics, alone, and how much state regulation or intervention is desirable to assure a wider diversity of broadcast programming, or the prohibition of phenomena agreed to be harmful, such as cigarette advertising or pornography, or the promotion of something positive like "net neutrality" that would guarantee the right to fast wireless Internet access to all (McChesney, 2007).

Political economy highlights that capitalist societies are organized according to a dominant mode of production that structures institutions and practices according to the logic of commodification and capital accumulation. Cultural production and distribution are accordingly profit- and market-oriented in such a system. Forces of production (such as media technologies and creative practice) are shaped according to dominant relations of production (such as the profit imperative, the maintenance of hierarchical control, and relations of domination). Hence, the system of production (e.g., market or state oriented) is important, as suggested below, in determining what sort of cultural artifacts are produced and how they are consumed. "Political economy," therefore, does not merely pertain solely to economics, but to the relations between the economic, political, technological, and cultural dimensions of social reality. The structure of political economy links culture to its political and economic context and opens up cultural studies to history and politics. It refers to a field of contestation and antagonism and not an inert structure as caricatured by some of its opponents.

Political economy should also discern and analyze the role of technology in cultural production and distribution, seeing, as in Marshall McLuhan (1964), how technology and forms of media help structure economic, social, and cultural practices and forms of life. In our era, the proliferation of new technologies and multimedia—ranging from computers to DVDs and iPods to new technologies of digitized film and music—calls attention to the key role of technology in the economy and everyday life and makes clear that technological and economic factors are often deeply interconnected. In a time of technological revolution, the role of technology is especially important, and so analysis of political economy must engage the dominant forms of technology.

In the present stage of capitalist hegemony, political economy grounds its approach within empirical analysis of the actual system of cultural production, investigating the constraints and structuring influence of the dominant capitalist economic system and a commercialized cultural system dominated by powerful corporations. Situating texts into the system of culture within which they are produced and distributed can help elucidate features and effects of the texts that textual analysis alone might miss or downplay. Rather than being an antithetical approach to culture, political economy can contribute to textual

analysis and critique. The system of production often determines what type of artifacts will be produced, what structural limits there will be as to what can and cannot be said and shown, and what kind of audience effects cultural artifacts may generate.

Study of the codes of television, film, or popular music, for instance, is enhanced by examining the formulas and conventions of media culture production. These cultural forms are structured by well-defined rules and conventions, and investigation of the production of culture can help elucidate the codes actually in play. Due to the demands of the format of radio or music television, for instance, most popular songs are three to five minutes long, fitting into the format of the distribution system. Network television news on the major corporate media in the United States has traditionally been to fit a small number of stories into short segments totaling about 22 minutes to leave plenty of room for advertising. The cable news networks' emphasis on "breaking news" and the need to fill 24/7 news windows creates a tendency to hype current events into media spectacles, as happened in the 1990s with the O. J. Simpson trial, the Clinton sex and impeachment scandals, and celebrity scandals involving Michael Jackson and others (see Kellner, 2003b). In the early twenty-first century, the 9/11 terrorist attacks created a media spectacle and a resulting "war on terror" that has dominated the epoch (Kellner, 2003b and 2005). Less dramatically, celebrity scandals involving Paris Hilton or Britney Spears, natural disasters like fires, hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, or heinous crimes of the day like the "Virginia Tech Massacre" are hyped into spectacles of the contemporary moment (Kellner, 2008).

Due to their control by giant corporations oriented primarily toward profit, film and television production in the United States are dominated by specific genres such as reality shows, talk and game shows, soap operas, situation comedies, action/adventure series, and so on. This economic factor explains why there are cycles of certain genres and subgenres, sequelmania in the film industry, crossovers of popular films into television series, and a certain homogeneity in products constituted within systems of production marked by rigid generic codes, formulaic conventions, and well-defined ideological boundaries.

Likewise, study of political economy can help determine the limits and range of political and ideological discourses and effects. My study of television in the United States, for example, disclosed that takeover of the television networks by major transnational corporations and communications conglomerates was part of a "right turn" within U.S. society in the 1980s whereby powerful corporate groups won control of the state and the mainstream media (Kellner, 1990). During the 1980s all three major television networks were taken over by corporate conglomerates: ABC was bought out in 1985 by Capital Cities, NBC was absorbed by General Electric, and CBS was purchased by the Tisch Financial Group. All the major U.S. corporate TV networks in the 1980s sought mergers, and this motivation, along with other benefits derived from Reaganism, might well have influenced them to downplay criticisms of Reagan and to generally support his conservative programs, military adventures, and simulated presidency (Kellner, 1990).

Corporate conglomeratization has intensified further, and today AOL and Time Warner, Disney, and other global media conglomerates increasingly control domains of production and distribution of culture (McChesney, 2000; Croteau and Hoynes, 2001; Bagdikian, 2004). In this global context, one cannot really analyze the role of the media

in the two U.S./Iraq wars, for instance, without analyzing the production and political economy of news and information, as well as the actual text of the Gulf and Iraq wars and their reception by various audiences (see Kellner, 1992; 2005). Likewise, the ownership by conservative corporations of dominant media corporations helps explain mainstream corporate media support of the Bush/Cheney administration and their policies, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Kellner, 2003b and 2005).

Looking toward entertainment, one cannot fully grasp the Madonna phenomenon without analyzing her marketing strategies, her political environment, her cultural artifacts, and their effects (Kellner, 1995). In a similar fashion, younger female pop music stars, such as Carrie Underwood, Avril Lavigne, or Kelly Clarkson, all deploy the tools of the glamour industry and media spectacle, as Madonna, Mariah Carey, Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, or N'Sync had in an earlier period. Likewise, one cannot explain the tremendous attention that a non-entity like Paris Hilton or a young actress like Lindsay Lohan receives from the media without grasping how the commercial imperatives of corporate television drive coverage of news and information toward entertainment (it's the ratings, stupid!). Further, in appraising the full social impact of pornography, one needs to be aware of the sex industry and the production process of, say, pornographic films, and not just focus on the texts themselves and their effects on audiences.

In the current conjuncture that is exhibiting a crossing of boundaries and synergy between information and entertainment industries, there have been significant mergers within these sectors. Previous forms of entertainment are rapidly being absorbed within the Internet, and the computer is coming to be a major household appliance and source of entertainment, information, play, communication, and connection with the outside world. The corporate media, communications, and information industries are frantically scrambling to provide delivery for the wealth of information, entertainment, and further services. These include increased Internet access, cellular telephones and satellite personal communication devices, iPods and iPhones, and computerized video, film, and information on demand, as well as Internet shopping and more unsavory services like pornography and gambling, and with strange new phenomena like microchips inserted directly into the body on the horizon. Hence, study of the political economy of media can be immensely useful for describing the infrastructure of the media, information, and communications industry and their effects on culture and society. Yet political economy alone does not hold the key to cultural studies, and important as it is, it has limitations as a single perspective.

Some political economy analyses reduce the meanings and effects of texts to rather circumscribed and reductive ideological functions, arguing that media culture merely reflects the ideology of the ruling economic elite that controls the culture industry and is nothing more than a vehicle for the dominant ideology. It is true that media culture overwhelmingly supports capitalist values, but it is also a site of intense conflict between different races, genders, sexual orientations, political ideologies, and social groups. Thus, in order to fully grasp the nature and effects of media culture, one should see contemporary society and culture as contested terrains and media and cultural forms as spaces in which particular battles over gender, race, sexuality, political ideology, and values are fought.

The conception of political economy proposed here goes beyond traditional, sometimes excessively economistic, approaches that focus on more strictly economic issues such as

ownership, gate-keeping, and the production and distribution of culture. While these issues are clearly important, the political and cultural dimensions of products of the media industries are also significant, and political economy should embrace relations between economy and the polity, culture and people, as well as the interconnection between production and consumption, distribution and use. Although some conceptions of political economy are reductive, focusing solely on the economic dimension, far richer notions of political economy are possible.

Moreover, in the present configuration of the emergence of a new global economy, a critical cultural and media studies needs to grasp the global, national, and local systems of media production and distribution. In the 1960s, critics of the global capitalist system described the domination of the world economy by transnational—mostly American and European—corporations as "imperialism" or "neo-imperialism," while its supporters celebrated "modernization." Today, the term "globalization" is the standard concept used to describe the emergent global economy and culture, which is a highly ambiguous and contradictory construct. On one hand, globalization refers to an economy dominated by transnational corporations, global institutions like the WTO or World Bank that are often tools of dominant nation-states, and a homogenized global consumer and media culture. On the other hand, globalization also involves the proliferation of new voices and perspectives on culture and society, as well as the politicization and contestation of forms of culture previously taken for granted. In a global culture, the proliferation of difference and new actors are part of the landscape and the question of representation becomes intensely politicized and contested.

In an era of globalization, one must therefore be aware of the global networks that produce and distribute media culture and spectacle in the interests of profit and corporate hegemony. In addition, the emergence and proliferation of new technologies are constantly creating novel cultural forms and hybrids of previous culture, thus the interconnection of economy and technology is an important component of a critical media/cultural studies. Further, in order to fully grasp the nature and effects of media culture, one needs to develop methods to analyze the full range of its meanings and effects, including textual analysis and audience research, as is indicated in the next two sections.

Textual Analysis

Whereas political economy approaches to the media and culture derive from a social sciences tradition, analysis of the politics of representation in media texts derives from a humanities-based textual approach. Earlier, mass communications approaches to media content ranged from descriptive content analysis to quantitative analysis of references, figures, or images in media texts. The more sophisticated methods of textual analysis, however, derive from more advanced understanding of texts, narratives, and representation, as well as the contributions of critical concepts such as ideology and hegemony, all of which have been developing since the 1960s.

The products of media culture require multidimensional close textual readings to analyze their various discourses, ideological positions, narrative strategies, image con-

struction, and effects. There have been a wide range of types of textual criticism of media culture, ranging from quantitative content analysis that dissects the number of, say, episodes of violence in a text, to qualitative study that examines images of women, blacks, or other groups, or that applies various critical theories to unpack the meanings of the texts or to explicate how texts function to produce meaning. Traditionally, the qualitative analysis of texts had been the task of formalist literary criticism, which explicated the central meanings, values, symbols, and stories in cultural artifacts by attending to the formal properties of imaginative literature texts—such as style, verbal imagery, characterization, narrative structure and point of view, and other formal elements of the artifact. From the 1960s on, however, literary-formalist textual analysis has been enhanced by methods derived from semiotics, a critical approach for investigating the creation of meaning not only in written languages but also in other, nonverbal codes, such as the visual and auditory languages of film and TV.

Semiotics analyzes how linguistic and nonlinguistic cultural "signs" form systems of meanings, as when giving someone a rose is interpreted as a sign of love, or getting an A on a college paper is a sign of mastery of the rules of the specific assignment. Semiotic analysis can be connected with genre criticism (the study of conventions governing established types of cultural forms, such as soap operas) to reveal how the codes and forms of particular genres follow certain meanings. Situation comedies, for instance, classically follow a conflict/resolution model that demonstrates how to solve certain social problems by correct actions and values and thus provide morality tales of proper and improper behavior. Soap operas, by contrast, proliferate problems and provide messages concerning the endurance and suffering needed to get through life's endless miseries, while generating positive and negative models of social behavior. And advertising shows how commodity solutions solve problems of popularity, acceptance, success, and the like.

Semiotic and genre analysis can also be merged with ideology critique and different theories of interpretation. A critical and multidimensional reading of the film *Rambo* (1982), for instance, would show how it follows the conventions of the Hollywood genre of the war film that dramatizes conflicts between the United States and its "enemies" (see Kellner, 1995). Semiotics describes how the images of the villains are constructed according to the codes of World War II movies and how the resolution of the conflict and happy ending follows the traditional Hollywood classical cinema, which portrays the victory of good over evil. Semiotic analysis would also include study of the strictly cinematic and formal elements of a film like *Rambo,* dissecting the ways that camera angles present Rambo as a god, or slow-motion images of him gliding through the jungle code him as a force of nature.

A critically informed reading of the award-winning 2007 film *There Will Be Blood* would investigate the ideological problematics involved in the interaction between capitalism, religion, and the family in the film (see Kellner, forthcoming). Semiotic analysis would engage the representations of oil production and how images of fire and hell suggest that demonic features of the industry, accompanied by analysis of the grating, modernist soundtrack by Radiohead, cut at dramatic moments by classical music from Brahms. A class analysis would engage the highly competitive and individualistic mania for wealth

and success and a gender analysis would dissect how the film puts on display patriarchical capitalism and the marginalization of women.

Textual analysis of cultural studies thus combines formalist analysis with critique of how cultural meanings convey specific ideologies of gender, race, class, sexuality, nation, and other themes like religion. Textual analysis is sometimes referred to as "hermeneutics," which interprets the different layers and meaning of texts and uses various methods to unpack myths and symbols, political and ideological meanings, and perhaps individual visions or neuroses of creators, or even social pathologies as a Freudian analysis, such as that practiced by Zizek (2005), would reveal.

Textual analysis should thus deploy a wide range of methods to fully explicate each dimension and to show how they fit into textual systems. Each critical method focuses on certain features of a text from a specific perspective, and each individual perspective illuminates some features of a text while ignoring others. Marxist methods tend to focus on class, for instance, while feminist approaches will highlight gender; critical race theory spotlights race and ethnicity, and gay and lesbian queer theories explicate sexuality, while Freudian analyses reveal a psychological or unconscious dimension. Literary hermeneutics would focus on the literary and aesthetic aspects of texts, as well as engaging philosophical, theological, or moral dimensions.

More sophisticated critical Marxism, feminisms, semiotics, or queer theory articulate their own method with the other approaches to develop multiperspectivist positions that engage multiple levels of the text. Fredric Jameson, who has long developed what might be seen as a Marxian version of cultural studies, has developed methods of analyzing multiple dimensions of a text, including utopian ones that project images of a better world, as well as engaging contemporary forms like postmodernism (1991).

Each specific critical method on its own has its particular strengths and limitations, each with privileged optics but also blind spots. Traditionally, Marxian ideology critiques have been strong on class and historical contextualization and weak on formal analysis, while some versions are highly "reductionist," reducing textual analysis to denunciation of ruling class ideology or economic imperatives. Feminism excels in gender analysis and in some versions is formally sophisticated, drawing on such methods as psychoanalysis and semiotics, although some earlier versions are reductive and the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and early 1970s often limited itself to analysis of images of gender. Psychoanalysis in turn calls for the interpretation of unconscious contents and meaning, which can articulate latent meanings in a text, as when Alfred Hitchcock's dream sequences in films like *Spellbound* (1945) or *Vertigo* (1958) project cinematic symbols that illuminate his characters' dilemmas, or when the image of the female character in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) framed against the bars of her bed suggests her sexual frustration, imprisonment in lower middle-class family life, and need for revolt.

Contemporary interpretive methods often stress the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and sexuality in texts, indicating how they are interconnected or perhaps in tension. Readings of the films *Babel* (2006) and *Crash* (2005), for instance, would stress how representations of race, class, gender, and perhaps sexuality work together in reproducing dominant stereotypes, put them in question, or are highly ambiguous and contradictory, as I would argue (see Kellner, forthcoming). Indeed, while occasionally representations

reproduce dominant ideological stereotypes, sometimes they oppose or undermine them, and other times they are contradictory and ambiguous.

Of course, each reading of a text is only one possible reading from one critic's subject position, no matter how multiperspectival, and may or may not be the reading preferred by audiences (which themselves will be significantly different according to their class, race, gender, ethnicity, ideologies, and so on). Because there is a split between textual encoding and audience decoding, there is always the possibility of a multiplicity of readings of any text of media culture (Hall, 1980c; Bobo, 1988; Rojek, 2009). However, there are limits to the openness or polysemic nature of any text, of course, and textual analysis can explicate the parameters of possible readings and delineate perspectives that aim at illuminating the text and its cultural and ideological effects. Such analysis also provides the materials for criticizing misreadings, or readings that are one-sided and incomplete. Yet to further carry through a cultural studies analysis, one must also examine how diverse audiences actually read media texts and attempt to determine what effects they have on audience thought and behavior.

Audience Reception and Use of Media Culture

All texts are subject to multiple readings depending on the perspectives and subject positions of the reader. Members of distinct genders, classes, races, nations, regions, sexual preferences, and political ideologies are going to read texts differently, and a media/cultural studies can illuminate why diverse audiences interpret texts in various, sometimes conflicting, ways. It is indeed one of the merits of British cultural studies to have focused on audience reception in recent years, and this focus provides one of its major contributions, though there are also some limitations and problems with many cultural studies approaches to the audience.[6]

A standard way to discover how audiences read texts is to engage in ethnographic research, in an attempt to determine how texts affect audiences and shape their beliefs and behavior. Ethnographic cultural studies have indicated some of the various ways that audiences use and appropriate texts, often to empower themselves. Radway's (1983) study of women's use of Harlequin novels, for example, shows how these books provide escapism for women and could be understood as reproducing traditional women's roles, behavior, and attitudes. Yet they can also empower women by promoting fantasies of a different life and may thus inspire revolt against male domination. Or they may enforce, in other audiences, female submission to male domination and trap women in ideologies of romance, in which submission to Prince Charming is seen as the alpha and omega of happiness for women.

Media culture provides materials for individuals to create identities and meanings and a media/cultural studies can detect specific ways that individuals use cultural forms. Teenagers use video games and music television as an escape from the demands of a disciplinary society. Males use sports as a terrain of fantasy identification, in which they feel empowered as "their" team or star triumphs. Such sports events also generate a form of community, currently being lost in the privatized media and consumer culture of our

time. Indeed, fandoms of all sorts, ranging from *Star Trek* fans ("Trekkies") and devotees of classical soap operas to fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, 24, Lost, Heroes,* or the latest reality TV hit, also form communities that enable people to relate to others who share their interests and hobbies. Some fans, in fact, actively recreate their favorite cultural forms, such as rewriting the scripts of preferred shows, sometimes in the forms of "slash," which redefine characters' sexuality, or in the forms of music poaching or remaking such as "filking" (see examples in Lewis, 1992, and Jenkins, 1992). With a proliferation of new media, audiences today also create their own blogs to comment on cultural texts, perhaps use YouTube to present their own videos, which could involve homage or satire of current popular texts, and might create their own archives of favorite artifacts of media culture with commentary on their Facebook or MySpace sites.

This emphasis on audience reception and appropriation helps cultural studies overcome the previous one-sided textualist orientations to culture. It also directs focus to the actual political effects that texts have and how audiences use texts. In fact, sometimes audiences subvert the intentions of the producers or managers of the cultural industries that supply them, as when astute young media users laugh at obvious attempts to hype certain characters, shows, or products.[7] Audience research can reveal how people are actually using cultural texts and what sort of effects they are having on everyday life. Combining quantitative and qualitative research, current reception studies, including some of the essays in this reader, are providing important contributions into how audiences actually interact with cultural texts (see the studies in Lewis, 1992, and Ang, 1996, and Rojek, 2009, for further elaboration of decoding and audience reception).

Yet there are several problems with audience reception studies as they have been constituted within some versions of cultural studies. First, there is a danger that class will be downplayed as a significant variable that structures audience decoding and use of cultural texts. Cultural studies in England were particularly sensitive to class differences—as well as subcultural differences—in the use and reception of cultural texts, but I have noted many dissertations, books, and articles in cultural studies in the United States and other places where attention to class has been downplayed or is missing altogether. This is not surprising as a neglect of class as a constitutive feature of culture and society is an endemic deficiency in the American academy in most disciplines.

There is also the reverse danger, however, of exaggerating the constitutive force of class and downplaying, or ignoring, such other variables as gender or ethnicity. Staiger (1992) notes that Fiske (1989a, 1989b), building on Hartley, lists seven "subjectivity positions" that are important in cultural reception, "self, gender, age-group, family, class, nation, ethnicity," and proposes adding sexual orientation. All of these factors, and no doubt more, interact in shaping how audiences receive and use texts and must be taken into account in studying cultural reception, for audiences decode and use texts according to the specific constituents of their class, race or ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, and so on.

Furthermore, I would warn against a tendency to romanticize the "active audience," by claiming that all audiences produce their own meanings, thus denying that media culture may have powerful manipulative effects. Some individuals who do cultural studies reception research distinguish between dominant and oppositional readings (Hall, 1980c), a dichotomy that structures much of Fiske's work. "Dominant" readings are those in which

audiences consume texts in line with the interests of the hegemonic culture and the ideological intentions of a text, as when audiences feel pleasure in the restoration of male power, law and order, and social stability at the end of a film like *Die Hard,* after the hero and representatives of authority eliminate the terrorists who had taken over a high-rise corporate headquarters. An "oppositional" reading, by contrast, celebrates the resistance to this reading in audience appropriation of a text. For example, Fiske (1993) observes resistance to dominant readings when homeless individuals in a Madison, Wisconsin, homeless shelter cheered the destruction of police and authority figures in the film, during repeated viewings of a videotape of *Die Hard* (1992) and lost interest near the end when Bruce Willis triumphed over the villains.

Although this can be a useful distinction, there is a tendency in some arenas of cultural studies to celebrate resistance per se without distinguishing between types and forms of resistance (a similar problem resides with indiscriminate celebration of audience pleasure in certain reception studies). For example, resistance to social authority by the homeless evidenced in their viewing of *Die Hard* could serve to strengthen brutal masculinist behavior and encourage manifestations of physical violence to solve social problems. Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and Herbert Marcuse, among others, have argued that violence can be either emancipatory, when directed at forces of oppression, or reactionary, when directed at popular forces struggling against oppression. Some feminists, by contrast, see all violence as forms of brute masculinist behavior, while those in the Gandhian tradition and many others see it as a problematical form of conflict resolution.

Resistance and pleasure cannot therefore be valorized per se as progressive elements of the appropriation of cultural texts, but difficult distinctions must be made as to whether the resistance, oppositional reading, or pleasure in a given experience is progressive or reactionary, emancipatory or destructive. In fact, Fiske's celebration of *Die Hard* fails to contextualize it within the cycle of male rampage films analyzed by Susan Jeffords in *Hard Bodies* (1993). *Die Hard* was one of a cycle of compensatory male fantasies that responded to the expansion of feminism and the conservative male response that refused to share power with women and that resisted feminist ideas. A series of masculinist ideological extravaganzas starring such ultra-macho men as Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Chuck Norris, and Bruce Willis featured male superheroes as the necessary solution to society's problems, thus promoting an ideology of male supremacy. As the "white male paranoia" and conservative response to feminism intensified, these masculinist fantasies became ever more brutal with three *Die Hard* films (1990, 1995, 2007), the *Young Guns* sequels (1990), or the *Rambo* sequels, doubling or even tripling the acts of redemptive male violence.[8]

Moreover, unqualified valorization of audience resistance to dominant meanings as good per se can lead to uncritical populist celebrations of the text and audience pleasure in its use of cultural artifacts. This approach, taken to the extreme, would lose its critical perspective and would lead to a populist positive gloss on audience experience of whatever is being studied. Such studies also might lose sight of the manipulative and conservative effects of certain types of mass-mediated culture and thus serve the interests of the culture industry as they are presently constituted and those groups who use the corporate media to promote their own interests and agendas.

Earlier British cultural studies wanted to engage both the ideological and the resistant, the hegemonic/dominant and the oppositional. This dialectical vision is evident in Hall's articles "Encoding/Decoding" and "Deconstructing the Popular" (1980c and 1981), which hope to acknowledge the power of the mass media to shape and enforce ideological hegemony, the power of the people to resist ideology, and the contradictory moments and effects of media culture. Cultural studies thus attempts to negotiate the split between manipulation theory, which sees mass culture and society in general as dominating individuals, and populist resistance theory which emphasizes the power of individuals to oppose, resist, and struggle against the dominant culture. Such a dual optic is also evident in the work of E.P. Thompson (1963) which stresses both workers' abilities to struggle against capitalist domination and forms of cooptation, and Dick Hebdige's *Subculture* (1979) which presents subcultural styles and youth culture both as forms of refusal and as commercial modes of incorporation of subcultural resistance into the dominant consumer culture.[9]

Thus one should attempt to avoid the one-sided approaches of manipulation and resistance theory and to mediate these perspectives in analysis. In a way, certain tendencies of the Frankfurt School can correct some of the limitations of cultural studies, just as British cultural studies can help overcome some of the limitations of the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School social theory always situated its objects of analysis within the framework of the vicissitudes of contemporary capitalism (Kellner, 1989, 1995). While this sometimes led to reduction of culture to commodities, ideology, and instruments of ruling class domination, it also elucidated the origins of mass-produced cultural artifacts within the capitalist production and accumulation process and thus forced attention to the economic origins and ideological nature of many of the artifacts of media culture. Likewise, the Frankfurt School emphasis on manipulation called attention to the power and seductiveness of the artifacts of the cultural industries and the ways that they could integrate individuals into the established order. The Frankfurt School emphasis on how the cultural industries produce "something for everyone, so that none can escape," suggests how difference and plurality are utilized to integrate individuals into the existing society.

The Frankfurt School emphasis on cooptation—even of seemingly radical and subversive impulses—raises the question of the nature and effects of "resistant readings," beloved by some cultural theorists. It suggests that even production of alternative meanings and resistance to "preferred meanings" may serve as effective ways to absorb individuals into the established society. Producing meanings can produce pleasures that integrate individuals into consumer practices that above all profit media industries. This possibility forces those who valorize resistance to emphasize what sort of resistance, what effects, and what difference does the resistance make?

The Frankfurt School was excellent at tracing the lines of domination within media culture but was less adept at ferreting out moments of resistance and opposition. Yet it always placed its analysis of media and audience within existing relations of production and domination, whereas many studies of the audience and reception often fail to situate the reception of culture in the context of social relations of power and domination. Furthermore, there remain text-centered approaches within cultural studies which engage in theoretically informed readings of texts without considering their production, reception, or anchorage in an institutional organization of culture that takes various specific forms in different coun-

tries, or regions, at different times in history—which is to say that textualist approaches often avoid study of the production and political economy of culture and even the historical context of culture.

Although emphasis on the audience and reception was an excellent correction to the one-sidedness of purely textual analysis, in recent years some versions of media/cultural studies have overemphasized reception and textual analysis, while underemphasizing the production of culture and its political economy. While earlier, the Birmingham group regularly focused attention on media institutions and practices, and the relations between media forms and broader social forms and ideologies, this emphasis waned in the ensuing years, to the detriment of much current work in cultural studies. For instance, in his classical programmatic article, "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall began his analysis by using Marx's *Grundrisse* as a model to trace the articulations of "a continuous circuit," encompassing "production-distribution-consumption-production" (1980c, 128ff.). He concretizes this model with focus on how media institutions produce messages, how they circulate, and how audiences use or decode the messages to produce meaning. Hall (1980b, 27) claimed that:

> The abstraction of texts from the social practices which produced them and the institutional sites where they were elaborated was a fetishization....This obscured how a particular ordering of culture came to be produced and sustained: the circumstances and conditions of cultural reproduction which the operations of the 'selective tradition' rendered natural, 'taken for granted.' But the process of ordering (arrangement, regulation) is always the result of concrete sets of practices and relations.

Against the erasure of the system of cultural production, distributions, and reception, Hall called for problematising culture and "making visible" the processes through which certain forms of culture became dominant (ibid).[10] Raymond Williams, one of the formative influences on British cultural studies, called for a "cultural materialism...the analysis of all forms of signification...within the actual means and conditions of their production" (1981, 64–65), focusing attention on the need to situate cultural analysis within its socioeconomic and political relations. Moreover, in a 1983 lecture published in 1985–1986, Richard Johnson provided a model of cultural studies, similar to Hall's earlier model, based on a diagram of the circuits of production, textuality, and reception, parallel to the circuits of capital stressed by Marx, illustrated by a diagram that stressed the importance of production and distribution. Although Johnson emphasized the need for political economy in cultural studies and criticizes the British film journal *Screen* for abandoning this perspective in favor of more idealist and textualist approaches (pp. 63ff.), much work in cultural studies has replicated this neglect. One could indeed argue that much subsequent media/cultural studies have tended to neglect analyses of the circuits of political economy and production in favor of text and audience-based analyses.

Furthermore, there is a danger that media/cultural studies in various parts of the world might lose the critical and political edge of earlier forms of British cultural studies. Cultural studies could easily degenerate into a sort of eclectic populism of the sort evident in the Popular Culture Association which is often celebratory and uncritical of the textual artifacts that it uses. Neglecting political economy, celebrating the audience and the pleasures of the popular, overlooking social class and ideology, and failing to analyze or criticize the politics of cultural texts will make media/cultural studies merely another academic subdivision,

harmless and ultimately of benefit primarily to the culture industry itself. Avoiding such a conservative development of cultural studies, I submit, requires a multiperspectivist approach that pays attention to the production of culture, to the texts themselves, and to their reception by the audience within the context of existing social relations of domination and contestation. This requires a variety of disciplinary and critical perspectives and linking cultural studies, ultimately, to critical social theory and radical democratic politics.

▨ Toward a Media/Cultural Studies Approach That Is Critical, Multicultural, and Multiperspectival

A critical media/cultural studies approach reads, interprets, and critiques its artifacts in the context of the social relations of production, distribution, consumption, and use out of which they emerge. The dialectic of text and context requires a critical social theory that articulates the interconnections and intersections between the economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions of media culture, thus requiring multiple or trans-disciplinary optics. Textual analysis in turn should utilize a multiplicity of perspectives and critical methods, while audience reception studies should delineate the wide range of subject positions, or perspectives, through which audiences appropriate culture and the key representations that construct the social world. This requires an insurgent multicultural approach that sees the importance of analyzing the dimensions of class, race and ethnicity, and gender and sexual preference, within the politics of representation of texts of media culture and their interconnectedness, while studying their impact on how audiences read, interpret, and use media culture, and in some cases produce alternative cultures.

A critical media/cultural studies attacks sexism, racism, or bias against specific social groups (i.e., gays, intellectuals, youth or seniors, and so on), and criticizes texts that promote any kind of discrimination or oppression. A media/cultural studies that is critical and multicultural provides comprehensive approaches to culture that can be applied to a wide variety of artifacts from pornography to Madonna, from MTV to TV news, or to specific events like the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the U.S. response (Kellner, 2003b) to events like the Columbine High School shootings or Virginia Tech massacre (Kellner, 2008). Its comprehensive perspectives encompass political economy, textual analysis, and audience research and provide critical and political perspectives that enable individuals to dissect the meanings, messages, and effects of dominant cultural forms.

Cultural studies is part of a critical media pedagogy that enables individuals to resist media manipulation and to increase their freedom and individuality. It teaches individuals how to critically read, interpret, and decode media representations and makes readers more critical and informed consumers and producers of their culture.[11] It can empower people to gain sovereignty over their culture and to be able to struggle for alternative cultures and political change, and thus is committed to radical democracy. A media/

cultural studies is thus not just another academic fad but can be part of a struggle for a better society and a better life.

Notes

1. I should make it clear that I am presenting my own construction of a field that is conceived very differently by other individuals in other countries, times, and with different theoretical and political histories. The traditions and literatures I cite will be among those that I have found most useful and influential over the years, and citations to my own texts will signal the theoretical and substantive work that have helped shape my own interventions and views of the field of media and cultural studies.

2. John Fiske (1989b: 72) argues that a cultural studies analysis basically focuses on the meanings encoded in a cultural text such as a Madonna video and the ways that audiences decode and use the text; I am arguing for a more complex model that involves analysis of political economy, politics of an era, technology, and other constituents, such that an analysis of Madonna would need to be contextualized in terms of the Reagan era, the rise of MTV and music video, complex appropriations and packaging of feminism in the era, and other factors (see Kellner, 1995).

3. On the Frankfurt School theory of the culture industry, see Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972 and the discussion of the Frankfurt School approach in Kellner, 1989. For histories of overviews of the Frankfurt School, see Jay, 1973 and Wiggershaus, 1994, and for recent defenses of the Frankfurt School approach to analyzing contemporary media culture, see Gunster 2006 and Steinert 2003.

4. This model was adumbrated in Hall, 1980b and Johnson, 1986/1987 and guided much of the early Birmingham work. Around the mid-1980s, however, the Birmingham group began to increasingly neglect the production and political economy of culture (some believe that this was always a problem with their work) and much of their studies became more academic, cut off from political struggle. I am thus trying to recapture the spirit of the early Birmingham project, reconstructed for our contemporary moment. For a fuller development of my conception of cultural studies, see Kellner 1992, 1995, 2003b, and Durham and Kellner, 2006. On the "missed articulation" between the Frankfurt School and British cultural studies, see Kellner, 1997.

5. The term *political economy* calls attention to the fact that the production and distribution of culture take place within a specific economic system, constituted by relations between the state and economy. For instance, in the United States a capitalist economy dictates that cultural production is governed by laws of the market, but the democratic imperatives of the system mean that there is some regulation of culture by the state. There are often tensions within a given society concerning how many activities should be governed by the imperatives of the market, or economics, alone and how much state regulation or intervention is desirable, to assure a wider diversity of broadcast programming, for instance, or the prohibition of phenomena agreed to be harmful, such as cigarette advertising or pornography (see Kellner, 1990).

6. Cultural studies that have focused on audience reception include Brunsdon and Morley, 1978; Radway, 1983; Ang, 1985, 1996; Morley, 1986; Pribam, 1988; Fiske, 1989a, 1989b; Jenkins, 1992; Lewis, 1992; Bobo, 1999. Some recent audience studies have focused on fans and fandom, which have elicited new energies and ideas for reception studies; see Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, 2007.

7. See de Certeau, 1984 and Jenkins, 1992 for more examples of audiences constructing meaning and engaging in practices in critical and subversive ways.

8. Gerbner (1992) noted the acceleration of violence in the initial *Rambo, Die Hard,* and *Young Gun* sequels, a tendency continuing to the present as the 2007 *Rambo* contained more violent episodes than any previous entry in the franchise.

9. For a wide range of studies of contemporary subcultures from different perspectives, see Muggleton, 2003 and Dolby and Rizvi, 2007.

10. Yet in another article from the same period Hall, 1987, rejected the political economy paradigm as reductionist and abstract (46–47). But note that he is rejecting the most economistic base/superstructure "logic of capital" model and not the importance of political economy per se ("This approach, too, has insights which are well worth following through"). Yet from the late 1970s through the present, the dimension of political economy has receded in importance throughout the field of cultural studies, and some have been arguing for reinserting its importance in a reconstructed approach that overcomes the reductionism of some versions of Marxism and political economy; see McGuigan, 1992; Kellner, 1995; and Grossberg, 1997.

11. For more on critical media literacy see Kellner, 1998; Kellner and Share, 2007; and Kahn and Kellner, 2007.

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